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DISPOSITIONAL PRONENESS TO FORGIVENESS AS A PRECURSOR OF OVERCOMING HELPLESSNESS

The research findings show the role of dispositional forgiveness in overcoming helplessness. The mechanism of psychotherapeutic effect of forgiveness is claimed to be related to its role in restoring the controllability of the situation. Individuals with higher proneness to forgiveness have been found to display engagement coping strategies, internal locus of control, optimism, mental health continuum. Thus forgiveness is claimed to be a personality resource of psychological well-being and self-efficacy.

Keywords: dispositional forgiveness, helplessness – restoring the situation controllability, mental health continuum.

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ДИСПОЗИЦІЙНА ГОТОВНІСТЬ ДО ПРОБАЧЕННЯ ЯК ПЕРЕДУМОВА ПОДОЛАННЯ БЕЗПОРАДНОСТІ

Розглянуто результати теоретичних і емпіричних досліджень, згідно з якими безпорадність може долатись завдяки диспозиційній готовності до пробачення. Розкрито механізм психотерапевтичного ефекту актів пробачення як засобу подолання відчуття неконтрольованості ситуації. Емпірично перевірено, що індивіди з більш високою готовністю до пробачення (як себе, так і оточуючих) характеризуються тенденцією до застосування активних копінг-стратегій, інтернальністю контролю, оптимізмом, безперервністю психічного здоров'я. Зроблено висновок, що пробачливість є особистісним ресурсом психологічного благополуччя і самоефективності.

Ключові слова: диспозиційна готовність до пробачення, безпорадність, поновлення контролюваності ситуації, безперервність психічного здоров'я.

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ДИСПОЗИЦИОННАЯ ГОТОВНОСТЬ К ПРОЩЕНИЮ КАК ПРЕДПОСЫЛКА ПРЕОДОЛЕНИЯ БЕСПОМОЩНОСТИ

Рассмотрены результаты теоретических и эмпирических исследований роли диспозиционной готовности к прощению в преодолении беспомощности как достаточно широко распространенного психологического феномена. Раскрыт механизм психотерапевтического эффекта актов прощения как средства преодоления переживания неконтролируемости ситуации. Эмпирически подтверждено, что индивидуумы с большей склонностью к прощению отдают предпочтение активным копинг-стратегиям, характеризуются интернальностью локуса контроля, оп-

тимизмом, стабильностью психического здоровья. Готовность к прощению интерпретируется как ценный личностный ресурс психологического благополучия и самоэффективности.

Ключевые слова: диспозиционная готовность к прощению, беспомощность, восстановление контролируемости ситуации, психологическое благополучие, самоэффективность.

Introduction.

It is common knowledge, that the state of helplessness is fairly frequently experienced even by the physically fit grown-ups under certain life situations, not necessarily objectively threatening. Among various personality precursors of helplessness such as: motivation deficit, inappropriate (over-protective) family upbringing in childhood, the type of dominating activity in adolescence and the like [3], researchers recently started referring to the phenomenon of dispositional forgiveness as a step-by-step process for resolving anger, restoring hope, overcoming resentment [5; 11] as likely consequential outcomes of overcoming helplessness.

The emergence of a new field of positive psychology and the “VIA” Inventory for assessing positive values and “character strengths” [14], conceptualized as “trait-like” personality characteristics, facilitated the interest to the phenomenon of forgiveness, which is claimed to be related to optimism and hope as character strengths formed under the influence of sticking to the positive value of Transcendence.

The objective of this paper is to illustrate by our recent empirical research data the role of dispositional forgiveness (assessed with Heartland Forgiveness Scale [15]) in preventing (or, at least, reducing) helplessness.

The psychological mechanisms of helplessness and the likely role of forgiveness in its prevention.

There occur situations in the life of practically every person, under which one experiences helplessness and, not seeing the ways out of those situations, decides to forgive oneself for not being resourceful enough and to accept the situation, that caused helplessness, as it is. The decision of this kind is claimed to bring about a relief. The psychological mechanism of experiencing it is quite explicable since helplessness is manifested in the form of such symptoms as: lack of the active efforts, sadness, negative attitude toward oneself, others and the world at large, cognitive deficit, the sensitivity of the self-esteem. The physical consequences of helplessness such as: the loss of appetite, reduction of the resistance of the immune system, caused by the changes in the neurochemical processes, require an urgent relief, and forgiveness appears to be an attainable means of coming out of the situation with minimum losses to one's image of the competent subject.

The perception of the situation as uncontrollable entails the formation of the stable feeling of helplessness, which, in the long run, negatively tells on the motivation, impairs the ability to learn and stimulates the development of anxiety, frustration, depression, and even the feeling of being “trapped in the cage”.

There is no consensus so far as to the psychological conceptualization of helplessness, which is defined as a sensation, feeling, mood, state, syndrome, and as a specific personality trait, indicative of the behavioral disorder.

Usually helplessness appears in response to a traumatic situation or a negative event of high level of intensity as well as a reaction to a sequence of uncontrollable, unpleasant and traumatic events, when the individual is likely to perceive them as utterly unchangeable.

Uncontrollability of the outcomes breeds pessimism, a stable disposition to avoid coping efforts, to ascribe the responsibility for the consequences of the unfavorable events to the external causes. It is noteworthy that the defining factors of the mechanism that underlies helplessness, is not emotional experience, related to the uselessness of efforts, but rather the feeling of uncontrollability of the situation, which the individual cannot overcome. Thus, the major factor in the formation of helplessness seems to be the lack of control over the situation or the subjective perception of the situation as uncontrollable.

The forgiveness, in its turn, is interpreted by the majority of researchers as a controlled conscious decision to get rid of the negative feelings, to change one's life, to stop perceiving oneself as a victim of the circumstances and restore the control over the situation. That is why many researchers [9; 16] relate the ability to forgive to the internal locus of control and to the means of restoring one's self-efficacy [12]. The internal locus of control facilitates the comprehension of the fact, that the results of one's activity depend upon one's efforts. Coleman has described paradoxical relationships between the feeling of control and forgiveness [4]. The individual often feels the loss of control when he (she) feels a grudge against someone and perceives the behavior of another person as unpardonable. The impossibility to forgive, in the long run, begins to prevent exercising the control over the situation and intensifies negative emotions. On the contrary, the proneness to forgive, ascribed to the internal locus of control, helps to resolve the situation [3].

With reference to the above cited reasoning one can hypothesize that forgiveness is incompatible with helplessness. It is associated with the restoring of control over a situation and, consequently, can be considered a means of overcoming helplessness.

In the opinion of D. Zhukov [18], who investigated the problem with reference to stressful situation in order to be able to resist an uncontrollable stress, one has to create at least an illusion of its controllability. In our opinion, the above referred to claim is very close in its meaning to one of the possible vari-

ants of behavior in the situations, entailing helplessness, namely substituting the aim of the activity by a pseudo-aim, which prevents the formation of the learned helplessness. It is the forgiveness that can perform the function of a pseudo-aim.

The analysis of a great number of research findings has shown that the acts of forgive others, as well as accepting their forgiveness, produce a favorable psychotherapeutic effect on the individual, facilitating both physical and psychological health, reducing the intensity of the feelings of anxiety, restoring positive attitude to other people [1; 6; 8].

The above cited considerations allowed us to conclude that proneness to forgiveness can be a valuable personality resource not only in the interpersonal relations, but also in the situations of the personal decision making and in the perception of the events and changes in the world at large.

The hypotheses and findings of this research

In this paper helplessness has been operationalized as a multi-factor parameter, comprehensively indicative of this psychic phenomenon.

We included into the nomenclature of that might manifest helplessness, we included, first of all, the types of *coping strategies*, habitually chosen by the individuals confronted with obstacles or various problems to be solved. There are, as is known, two sets of coping strategies: *the reactive* and the *proactive* ones.

Among the reactive coping strategies there are two types of strategies, which can be considered, under certain situations, indicative of helplessness: the emotion-focused one and the avoidance strategy. Their personality precursors are different [2], but the major consequential outcomes are similar – they signal of helplessness, which may be determined, through, both by the objective situational factors and by the inner (personality) traits, values and the “trait-like” character strength. The latter, in their turn, can signal either motivational or volitional aspects of the personality functioning. Naturally, the internal factors are of interest, in the first rate, in searching for the psychological outcomes of helplessness.

Unlike reactive coping strategies, which are classified by contemporary researchers as the engagement ones (such as a problem-focused strategy or seeking social support in solving a complicated task), the *disengagement* strategies are more indicative either of helplessness or of the lack of motivation.

As to the set of the proactive coping strategies, all of which are interpreted as the engagement ones since they include the strategic and the preventive coping efforts, preparing the individual for coping with future problems, our colleagues (I. Arshava and D. Nosenko [13]) recently have suggested interpreting the psychological phenomenon of self-handicapping, first categorized by American authors [10] in terms of the self-guarding motivational strategy, as a *disen-*

gagement proactive *coping strategy*. The latter can also be interpreted as indicative of helplessness.

Among the likely precursors of helplessness, the contemporary researchers also mention, as was stated in the previous section of the paper, the externality of the locus of control, dispositional neuroticism, low level of conscientiousness as a global personality trait and the like.

There is a great deal of publications implying that the likely consequential outcomes of helplessness can be described in terms of hopelessness, frustration, disruption in the mental-health continuum and pessimism.

In the light of the presented above brief review of the likely outcomes and consequences of helplessness we hypothesized that, since the dispositional forgiveness is claimed to be a “step-by-step process of resolving anger, restoring hope, overcoming resentment” [5; 11], it might facilitate gaining the experience of overcoming helplessness not only in the *inter-personal* relations, but also in the self-perception and the perception of the world at large.

The rationale for this line of hypothesizing is based on the interpretation of forgiveness as a phenomenon comprising at least three major facets: forgiving others, forgiving oneself (for not having been efficacious enough) and accepting the situation, in which the individual had been unsuccessful, as an experience to ponder on and discover possibilities of improvement.

To carry out the empirical study we have chosen the following data tools. Since there is no special inventory to assess the proneness to forgiveness in the Ukrainian language, we have used Heartland Forgiveness Scale [15] translated into Ukrainian by psychologists who are proficient in English (using the methods of back-translation). The inventory has three scales: forgiving oneself, forgiving others and accepting the existing situation as it is, no matter how adverse it might appear to the individual. To assess helplessness we used a number of different data tools. With the help of the CISS inventory designed by Norman Endler and James Parker (adapted by T. Kryukova) we assessed the domination of the emotion-focused coping strategy and the avoidance one as the most likely direct indicants of the proneness to helplessness and the low frequency of choosing the problem-focused strategy, as its indirect measure. The Rotter's Locus of Control Scale was used to assess the tendency of the individual to ascribe responsibility for the events in one's life and the outcomes of one's activity to the *external causes* as a likely indicant of proneness to helplessness. The express diagnostics of the proneness to frustration by V. Boyko was chosen to diagnose the psychic state, habitually experienced by the individuals as an indicant of their proneness to helplessness.

The scale of hopelessness by Beck was also chosen as a data-tool to assess the likely outcomes of high level of helplessness. We have also used a new scale by Corey Keyes – “Mental Health Continuum-SF” (2009), adapted by

E. Nosenko and A. Chetverik-Burchak, as indicative of the likely consequential outcomes of helplessness. The latter includes several sub-scales to assess different forms of well-being: hedonic one, psychological and social ones. The data-tools, used in this research, also included the VIA inventory [14], translated into English by E. Nosenko and L. Baisara. We have paid a special attention to the character – strength of hope (as a sign of optimism), claimed to be formed when the individuals stick to the value of transcendence. We hypothesized that the individuals, who ascribe significance to the character strength of “Hope”, are less prone to hopelessness, since they expect favorable developments in future and perceive future as controllable.

On a sample of 62 participants: 26 male and 36 female an empirical study was carried out, which was designed as a quasi-experiment for two non-equivalent groups.

On the first stage of the research the participants were tested on their proneness to forgiveness (using Heartland Forgiveness Scale). The sample was split into two opposite groups using the method of cluster-analysis (K-means algorithm) on the four independent variables: 1) overall measure of forgiveness; 2) the ability to forgive oneself; 3) the ability to forgive others and 4) the proneness to accept the situation as it is.

Two clusters of participants appeared to differ statistically significantly on various aspects of the hypothesized helplessness manifestation. In the cluster with the lower proneness to forgiveness 71,4% of participants were found to have high levels of practically all of the above described indicants of helplessness, while in the cluster with the higher proneness to forgiveness only 48% of individuals demonstrated the signs of helplessness. The empirical data, presented in Table 1 below, demonstrate differences between the cluster practically in all the dependent variables.

As one can judge from the data, presented in Table 1, the clusters with different levels of proneness to forgiveness differ most significantly on the following indicants of helplessness: distractibility ($p \leq 0,001$); hopelessness in their perception of the complicated situations ($p \leq 0,001$); intensity of frustration ($p \leq 0,001$); hope and optimism ($p \leq 0,001$). The clusters also appeared to differ on the likely consequential outcomes of helplessness manifested by the different indicants of well-being: social, psychological and hedonic as components of the mental health continuum.

Table 2 shows the average differences in the percentage of individuals with high and low levels of proneness to forgiveness among the participants characterized by higher level of helplessness (assessed with the help of cluster – analysis, K-means algorithm). Low level of proneness to forgiveness is pertinent to 71% of the individuals, characterized by high level of helplessness,

while in the cluster of participants with high level of proneness to forgiveness there are 48,4% of individuals characterized by helplessness.

Table 1

Differences in the percentage of participants with the likely indicants of helplessness in the clusters with high and low levels of overall proneness to forgiveness

Variables to assess the levels of helplessness	Percentage of participants with the likely indicants of helplessness:		The value of ϕ^* Fisher criterion
	in the cluster with <i>high</i> overall proneness to forgiveness	in the cluster with <i>low</i> overall proneness to forgiveness	
<i>Coping strategies:</i>			
- problem-focused	68%	43,2%	1,951***
- emotional-focused	32%	67,6%	2,812*
- avoidance	40%	64,9%	1,947***
- distraction	24%	75,7%	4,199*
- social distraction	52%	56,8%	0,371
<i>Locus of control:</i>			
- external	24%	75,7%	4,199*
- internal	92%	40,5%	4,589*
<i>Hopelessness</i>	24%	67,6%	3,503*
<i>Frustration</i>	24%	75,7%	4,199*
<i>Hope (optimism)</i>	72%	40,5%	2,495*
<i>Mental health continuum</i>	72%	37,8%	2,712*
<i>Well-being:</i>			
- hedonic	76%	43,2%	2,642*
- social	72%	43,2%	2,287**
- psychological	76%	35,1%	3,283*

Note: * – level of significance $p \leq 0,001$; ** – level of significance $p \leq 0,01$;

*** – level of significance $p \leq 0,05$.

This “opposite”, in a sense, procedure of testing the major hypothesis of the empirical research has confirmed the observed tendency: the higher is the

proneness to helplessness, the less likely the individuals appear to be disposed to forgiveness.

Table 2

Differences in the proneness to forgiveness between clusters of individuals having statistically significant differences in the multi-factor indicants of helplessness (assessed by the method of cluster analysis, k-means algorithm)

Independent variable	Percentage of the participants having different levels of forgiveness as a dependent variable		Level of differences by ϕ^* Fisher criterion
	Low level of proneness to forgiveness	High level of proneness to forgiveness	
Helplessness	71%	48,4%	1,835***

Note: *** – The differences are significant on the level of $p \leq 0,05$.

Table 3 displays differences in the tendency to experience helplessness by the individuals with low and high proneness to different forms of forgiveness.

Table 3

Differences in the tendency to experience helplessness by the individuals with low and high proneness to different forms of forgiveness

Level of three major forms of forgiveness		Percentage of individuals with proneness to helplessness	The value of ϕ^* Fisher criterion
Forgiving oneself	Low	71,4%	1,732***
	High	50%	
Forgiving others	Low	71%	1,835***
	High	48,4%	
Accepting the situation	Low	64,5%	0,78
	High	54,8%	

Note:*** – level of significance $p \leq 0,05$.

Conclusion and discussion.

In the randomly chosen sample of participants, who took part in this research, there appeared 25 participants with low level of helplessness and 37 – with high level. This distribution of participants speaks for itself and illustrates the significance of the task, set in this research, - to find factors, causing help-

lessness. Statistically significant inter-cluster differences were registered between all of the chosen measures of helplessness manifestation. Particularly pronounced inter-cluster differences were found between externality, hopelessness, frustration; proneness to give preference to avoidance and emotion-focused coping strategies in dealing with stressful situations. Differences were also observed in the levels of hedonic, psychological and social well-being of the participants depending on their proneness to forgiving.

In the course of the research it has been found out that the approach chosen for the operationalization of helplessness in terms of: 1) its symptoms: tendency to choose different coping strategies with different frequencies; 2) characteristics of control exercised by the individuals with different levels of helplessness: externality vs. internality; 3) the emotional states pertinent to the individuals with different level of helplessness, particularly the state of hopelessness and frustration on the one side, and an optimistic state, – on the other, appeared informative.

It allowed to describe adequately, as it seems, the psychological mechanism of the impact of the proneness to forgiveness on restoring control over a difficult situation, overcoming negative states and the resentment of the situations which appeared uncontrollable.

The empirical data, presented in the research, proved that among the forms of forgiveness, which help reduce helplessness, the abilities to forgive *oneself and others* seem to be most effective. This finding allows expecting that there is a rationale in resorting to forgiveness as a means of overcoming helplessness. Moreover it has been shown that forgiveness favourably tells on the mental-health continuum, the psychodiagnostic approach for the assessment of which incorporates three basic forms of well-being – hedonic, social and psychological, the significance of which as the consequential outcomes of reducing helplessness is quite obvious.

There are interesting prospects of future research. It seems reasonable to investigate the role of the *proactive coping strategies* as likely effective means of overcoming helplessness and its recently conceptualized disengagement form – *self-handicapping*, which is, on the contrary, is likely to signal helplessness. There are prospects of studying the role of forgiveness as a valuable personality resource leading to the growth of self-esteem, self-acceptance and self-evolution.

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